



An Ecological Sailing Towards Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract— This paper is an ecocritical reading of Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy which comprises of three historical fictions, *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015). It is a documentary of the opium trade between India and China and the trafficking of people as indentured labors by the East India Company during the mid-nineteenth century. The paper will examine the ecocentric dimensions in the work of Ghosh. Ecocriticism is a rapidly emerging field of literary study that considers the relationship which human beings share with the environment. The main issues that become very prominent in these novels are Ecological Imperialism and Ecocide. These terms are portrayed by Ghosh in his Ibis Trilogy in a very realistic manner with the grand scale of opium war. Opium war is one of the greatest incidents in the colonial history of India. This paper will analyse the issue of environmental degradation as found in the Ibis Trilogy in the light of ecocriticism.

Keywords— Ibis Trilogy, Opium, Ecocriticism, Ecological, Indentured Labors, Imperialism.

I. INTRODUCTION

The term ecocriticism was first coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay entitled *Literature and ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. In a broader sense, Ecocriticism guides us to examine the world around and critiquing the mannerisms of society in the treatment of nature. The theory tries to help in analysing the text with an eye on nature portrayal by the author and the ecocritical trope within the text. According to Cheryll Glotfelty, "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty).

One of the main aims in ecocriticism is to study how human beings in society behave and react in relation to nature and ecological aspects. This form of ecocriticism has gained a lot of attention during recent years due to higher social emphasis on environmental destruction linked to increased usage of technology. It is hence a fresh way of analysing and interpreting literary texts, which brings new dimensions to the field of literary and theoretical studies. Environmental history and the ecological imagination suggest that today we are facing a

global crisis not because of the function of ecosystem but because of the way our moral system works (Das 160).

The topic of discussion in this paper talks about whether the cultivation of poppies affect the land and if yes, then how? And if the human beings depart from their own land or nature where they live, by force or by their own will, then what problems they have to face in a new or an alienated place? The paper also evaluates the role of environmental consciousness in human beings and attempts to understand their direct relationship with nature. It also analyses how the practice of British colonization in India affected the indigenous people.

One of the objectives of the present paper is to study, identify, discuss, analyse and to interpret ecocriticism in the work of Amitav Ghosh. The paper aims to explore the impact of British Colonization on the native population of India and the nature. It mainly examines the apparent shift in the role of environment in the indigenous people. Using postcolonial ecocriticism as the main theory in the paper, it will also bring out the issue of post-colonialism and ecocriticism and other social issues raised by the novel.

The research methodology adopted in this paper is analytical, descriptive and theoretical. The primary data in the form of the text of Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* was collected at the initial stage followed by the collection of the secondary data which included the review of the related literature as critically analysed by various other writers and environmentalists. Many articles dealing with ecocritical theory were drawn out from various academic sites and analysed for the fulfilment of the objectives of the paper.

II. AMITAV GHOSH'S IBIS TRILOGY: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The *Ibis Trilogy* is a historical fiction written by Amitav Ghosh which deals with the trade of opium between India and China run by the East India Company. *Ibis* is the name of a ship in which most of the characters meet for the first time. The first of the *Ibis Trilogy* is the lyrical and beautifully visualised *Sea of Poppies* which is set in the nineteenth century against the background of the large-scale migration: the transportation of indentured labour, the *girmitiyas*, from Bihar and Bengal to Mauritius- "Mareech" as the *girmitiyas* call it. After three years, Ghosh gave us *River of Smoke* (2011). The ludicrously profitable opium trade that formed much of the background to *Sea of Poppies* comes to the forefront in this second instalment of the *Ibis Trilogy*. The final instalment of the *Ibis Trilogy* is *Flood of Fire* which deals with the tension in the atmosphere that has been rapidly mounting between China and British India following the crackdown on opium smuggling by Beijing. No resolution has been found and a war is declared by the colonial government. The *Ibis Trilogy*, with its various plot lines, is an analysis of liberated globalization and merciless economic bullying through the stories of ordinary people whose lives are deeply affected and changed beyond recognition. In fact, the decisions were always made by the fat cats at the top of the international trade hierarchy. This masterpiece of Ghosh very aptly demonstrates his great concern for environment.

The *Ibis Trilogy* is a sweeping historical saga which was set during the outbreak of the first opium war fought between the two greatest countries - Great Britain and China from 1839 to 1842. Amitav Ghosh in his novels has built up a form of historical fiction which focuses on the commodities, languages, technology and ideas in the contact zones created by the colonial rendezvous with the indigenous population. It also highlights the historicity of the colonial process. All these themes are explored on the most ambitious scale. Amitav Ghosh as a novelist presents a descriptive account of the people who have been

displaced from their own roots and culture due to some reasons (Khanna 50). This historical fiction brings to life the seafaring world of Asia during the time of Opium Wars and also the exposition of subaltern narrative.

III. ECOLOGICAL SAILING AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Ecological Sailing here implies the dislocation or the movement of the characters who are forced to get uprooted from their own space due to an ecological impact on their lives and reach a newer world to re configure their identities. This shift in place makes them detached from all the cultural norms to which they belonged always and introduces them to a newer world with newer cultures where they need to start afresh. And willingly or unwillingly they have to accept and adopt the new system of cultural beliefs and practices which becomes a necessity for their survival. Cultural identity is that feel of belongingness to a specific group or space which relates one to a specific nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality or any kind of group with specific set of traditions, customs, practices and beliefs. It also refers to the psychological connection between an individual's self and a culture. The ecological sailing leads them to a loss of identity where they are unable to find anything to which they have been related or associated throughout their lives. The quest for identity after getting uprooted from the origins finally calms down as they experience a complete transformation and adoption.

Today the assumption of fixed identity has been rendered obsolete by the universal phenomena such as globalization and post-modernism. Now it is recognized as a changeable notion which allows a great trans-border exchange of cultures and information. The outcome is a mingling of the cultures and reconstruction of a heterogeneous space rather than a homogeneous one. As Stuart Hill in his essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* has defined Cultural Identity as "...one shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves' which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common..." Within the framework of this definition, it is the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which are reflected in us as 'one people'. Such a comprehension of cultural identity played a crucial role in much of the post-colonial struggles.

As the marine element in the *Ibis Trilogy* shows an incommensurable presence, we witness an ecological sailing, from one culture to another or from an old identity to a new identity, of all the characters on board who feel the oceanic effects on their lives in some way or the other.

Though sharing a common space in the ship, they belong to different social communities and caste. As a result, their intensified and renegotiated interactions lead to their cultural re-configurations and this obviously leads to the necessity to create a common platform for coexistence. A major portion of Amitav Ghosh's novel *Sea of Poppies* is devoted to the oceanic crossing of the Indian ocean which takes place in 1838 with the import of the indentured laborers to Mauritius. The trilogy gets its name from the ship *Ibis*, on board which most of the main characters meet for the first time. The *Ibis* starts from Calcutta carrying indentured servants and convicts destined for Mauritius, but runs into a storm and faces a mutiny. Two other ships are caught in the same storm - the *Anahita*, a vessel carrying opium to Canton, and the *Redruth*, which is on a botanical expedition, also to Canton (Jayagopalan 351). While some of the passengers of the *Ibis* reach their destination in Mauritius, others find themselves in Hongkong and Canton. The merchants, the sailors, or the trading company agents, who cross the '*Black water*' out of their own interests, share some common experiences of homesickness, anxiety, anguish and adversity with those of the unwilling overseas transporters like the coolies and convicts.

Ghosh's characters are shown victimized by various power structures including gender, class, and race divisions and they are striving to find their identity and a place of their own and in a genuine course of time we find that it is the *Ibis* which becomes "a great wooden mai-bap, an adoptive ancestor and parent of dynasties yet to come" with which they start identifying themselves (Sea of Poppies 356). In *Sea of Poppies*, gender subalternity has been depicted through the character of Deeti. Being a gender subaltern, she is doubly marginalized at the hands of both the patriarchy as well as colonization. Gender subalternity in her life is due to her poverty and being married to a rich man though crippled. She doesn't get her space to revolt for the mistreatment which she faces at all levels, be it physical or mental or even emotional. This concept has also been asserted by Gayatri Spivak in her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' where she explains that how and why the subaltern women cannot speak due to lack of space. There are other women characters also in the novel like Elokeshi, Paulette, Hearu and Munia who depict an uncongenial and nasty condition of women in Indian society. These subaltern women characters are the "groups that feel subordinated" (Spivak 290). In the words of Gayatri Spivak, Women and her position in the Indian society "are manoeuvred between indigenous patriarchy and colonial government." (Spivak 234). Deeti is a young woman from a small Indian village, married to Hukam Singh who along with his brother serves in the British army. Somehow Hukam Singh has to leave army as he

becomes crippled. Thereafter he joins the Opium Factory at Ghazipur. And Opium starts penetrating into their lives affecting everyone. Deeti also comes under its harsh effect and bears physical and emotional troubles at home right from the day of her wedding. She is made to inhale opium on her first night by blowing it on her face and is made to make conjugal relation with her brother-in-law in an unconscious state to hide Hukam Singh's impotency. She has to face rude behaviour of the new family. All her dreams are shattered when she realizes that she is pregnant by her brother-in-law Chandan Singh. Oppressed by sexual violence, she remains submissive just for her daughter's sake.

The trilogy deals with social, political, commercial and linguistic intricacies of the early colonial period. Different cultures have been mirrored in the trilogy including the Bihari peasants, the Bengali Zamindars, the Parsi businessmen, Cantonese boat people, British traders and officials, and a mulatto sailor. The social structure is hierarchical as it is stratified into various sections which are known as 'class' which is further categorized into the upper and lower classes. The upper class includes people of high caste and high standing; the characters of the Burnhams, the Thakurs, Hukam Singh, Chandan Singh, Bhyro Singh, and Zachary Reid's are the characters from the *Ibis* Trilogy who represent the powerful section of the society. The lower class consists of people who usually belong to low caste or have unstable financial stature, and are the weaker section of society. The characters of Deeti, Kalua, Paulette Lambert, Neel Rattan Halder, and Zachary Reid embody the weaker section of the social order in the Trilogy. Though they were oppressed for varied reasons like gender, caste, class, prejudice and greed; yet they had formed a world where they were free of the shackles of the discriminating thoughts of the upper crust of the population. The familial relationship shared between "ship-siblings" originated from the heart and were much stronger and indifferent to the hierarchical bigotry of the distinguishing nature of the upper classes. Akin to a foster family, they (the ship siblings) too had grown to care for each other as a clan and a unit and the lack of blood relations among them did not affect the kindled warmth of their kinship (Shahab and Rawal 2).

Ghosh mirrors a picture of India of 1830s with its rituals, customs, society, hardships, British misrule, and a horde of men and women indecisive about their destination and where they are heading towards. Amitav Ghosh's novels portray the continuing cultural confluence in India under the British rule in magical realistic mode. Through the character of Deeti, Ghosh has mirrored the culture of India when under British colonisation which included many customs and rituals which were a part of Indian

lifestyle those days and may be even today. As a part of their daily routine, Deeti and her family go to the Ganga river to bath. This also brings into light how Deeti's day to day need of water is fulfilled by the Ganga.

"...Now, her mind turned to her shrine room again: with the hour of the noontime puja drawing close, it was time to go to the river for a bath. After massaging poppy-seed oil into Kabutari's hair and her own. Deeti draped her spare sari over her shoulder and led her daughter towards the water, across the field" (Sea of Poppies 17).

Deeti, the main protagonist of the novel, reflects upon the dependence of humans on nature. She is a native woman living on the outskirts of small town Ghazipur and earning her livelihood out of poppy farming. In addition to possessing environmental consciousness, she has also been portrayed as a typical Indian woman undergoing all those tasks very efficiently which are usually put on the feminine shoulders by the patriarchal society. Her direct involvement with nature and being conscious about it, she is able to notice the difference between precolonial and postcolonial India in reference to opium cultivation. The harmful and thus making it barren for food crops. Forced Opium cultivation has devastated not only the land but also the human life and the indigenous population is now left with no other option than to migrate to a new land. Here, the changes in the society and culture undergo in its path of progress. In *Sea of Poppies*, the nature has played a very significant role though different for different characters. The relationship of different sections of people with the environment differ depending upon how much deeply they are connected to it. For instance, the women, convicts, immigrants etc all have a varied connection with Nature.

"How had it happened that when choosing the men and women who were to be torn from this subjugated plain, the hand of destiny had stayed so far inland, away from the busy coastlines, to alight on the people who were, of all, the most stubbornly rooted in the silt of the Ganga, in a soil that had to be sown with suffering to yield its crop of story and song? It was as if fate had thrust its fist through the living flesh of the land in order to tear away a piece of its stricken heart" (Sea of Poppies).

This is where Amitav Ghosh endeavours to put forth the fact that the indigenous population especially belonging to lower class was destined to be chosen by fate to get uprooted from their native land which in this case had been the silt of Ganga and lose their identity to find themselves amongst new people on a newer and stranger land.

IV. HOW HUMANS AFFECT THE ENVIRONMENT?

Deeti, the protagonist, is one of the victims of this sudden transformation. She is the representative of the entire exposed community. In her regretful reminiscence she is trying to contemplate on her past when her mother:

Would send some of the poppy seeds to the oil press, and the rest she would keep for the house, some for replanting, and some to cook with meat and vegetables. As for the sap, it was griddled of impurities and left to dry, until the sun turned it into *Akbari Afeem*; at that time, no one thought of producing the wet, treacherously chandu opium that was made and packaged in the English factory, to be sent across the sea in boats (Ghosh 29).

Poppy cultivation becomes compulsory for the native farmers. So that the land is losing its fertility. As a result, these people have to undergo the hardship leading to debt and migration. Nevertheless, opium regulates the lives of these people of Ghazipur. Kalua feeds his ox opium so that it will get relaxation after the day's hard labour. Deeti cannot pay Kalua because she does not have money. So, she gives opium to Kalua in exchange.

The insects also get attracted towards the poppy pod because of its nectar flowing out of it and start behaving in an abnormal way. The sweet smell of the poppy pod attracts bees, grasshopper, wasp and they get easily struck in the liquid coming out of the pod. As the sap turns black their dead bodies get dissolved and become part of opium which is sold in the market. Even the monkeys who live near the Opium Factory are behaving in a weird manner. They are not agile and spontaneous. They seem to be lethargic and are not willing to move. Ghosh describes: When they came down from the trees it was to lap at the sewers that drained the factory's effluents; after having satiated their cravings, they would climb back into the branches to resume their scrutiny of the Ganga and its currents. Even the dust coming out of the opium factory causes health hazard. People living nearby sneeze. The animals are also caught by the same problem. The ox of Kalua begins to sniff as it comes close to the factory with Deeti and her daughter. Fishermen, however, find an innovative technique of catching large number of fishes. The river close to the opium factory is filled with broken earthenware pots used for bringing opium to the factory. Then these pots are discarded and trashed near the river. Fishes could easily be caught because of the opium found in the earthenware: This stretch of river bank was unlike any other, for the ghats around the Carcanna were shored up with thousands of broken earthenware gharas - the round-bottomed vessels or mud pots in which raw opium was brought to the factory. The belief was widespread that

fish were more easily caught after they had nibbled at the shards, and as a result the bank was always crowded with fishermen. The bad effect of the opium is widespread. It gets messed up with the water of the river making the water unfit for drinking both by humans and animals. The river Ganga which ran beside an opium factory carried with it the sewage of the factory. Ganga water is not only worshipped by the Indians as holy water but also drunk by them to get rid of unholy things (Ameen 39).

V. HOW ENVIRONMENT PROVES TO BE AN AID TO HUMAN BEING

When Deeti elopes with Kalua, Nature helps her in all possible ways and also help them both to survive. Despite having no money, both are saved from hunger and thirst just because they are in close vicinity of the waters of Ganga, it is shown in the following quotation:

“...Every evening Kalua would light a fire and Deeti would knead and cook a sufficient number of rotis to see them through the day. With the Ganga close at hand, they had so far lacked for neither food nor water” (Sea of Poppies 189).

In *Sea of Poppies*, it can be seen how Deeti shows her respect and gratitude to the nature. To show her gratitude to the nature, she pours out the water and offerings to the Ganga River which is shown in the following quotation:

“...Turning in the direction of Benares, in the West, Deeti hoisted her daughter aloft, to pour out a handful of water as a tribute to the holy city. Along with the offering, a leaf flowed out of the child's cupped palms. They turned to watch as the river carried it downstream towards the ghats of Ghazipur” (Sea of Poppies 7).

This is how an extraordinary chain of being binds man and nature and reflect a mutual interdependence.

VI. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the trilogy portrays an historical story based on a significant post-colonial event of an immense scale known as Opium War. This fictionalised piece of art unravels the grisly effect of environmental degradation ultimately leading to a disastrous apocalypse. The central concern of this paper was ecological criticism and here we find how the fiction of Ghosh highlighted the effect of ecological imperialism on the flora and fauna of three countries - India, China and Mauritius. We find an amalgamation of fiction and history and the entire story revolves around the opium war which is a major incident of the colonial history. Ecocriticism is not only a critical

theory, but also a reality we are living in and also experiencing. Ecocriticism has such a wide scope since it belongs to different facets such as social, cultural, political, religious, or scientific. To prevent our green planet from becoming barren, we need to stop the unending intervention of humans in its own ways of going otherwise, the cosmos would be in under threat.

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